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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000728

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y - PARA 13 CLASSIFICATION CORRECTED

SIPDIS

FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/11/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [AJ](#) [RU](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI-RUSSIAN COORDINATION ON PUTIN'S GABALA
PROPOSAL

REF: A. BAKU 00720

[1](#)B. BAKU 00219

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Donald Lu per 1.4 (b, d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The GOAJ publicly and privately has admitted that it had discussions with Moscow regarding potential U.S. - Russian use of the Gabala radar station before Putin made his June 7 announcement on the sidelines of the G8 Summit in Heiligendamm, but the precise nature of this dialogue is unclear. The GOAJ's public and private explanations largely coincide, emphasizing that prior Azerbaijani-Russian discussions were limited. We have lingering questions, however, about how closely Baku and Moscow coordinated their positions before Putin's June 7 announcement. End Summary.

Azimov Confirms GOAJ Discussed Missile Defense with Russia

[1](#)2. (C) In a June 8 meeting with the Charge d'Affaires, Deputy FM Araz Azimov confirmed that President Putin had called President Aliyev earlier this week to discuss missile defense. Azimov said that Putin's announcement had come as a complete surprise to him and that FM Mammadyarov had to confirm this information directly with President Aliyev because the Ministry had been unaware of the phone conversation between the two presidents. Based on his discussion with Mammadyarov, Azimov said he believed that Aliyev probably did not respond in exactly the manner that Putin described; Azimov believed that Aliyev most likely had told Putin something along the lines of "we want this problem to be solved." Azimov also noted that Aliyev's instructions to Mammadyarov on the Gabala proposal were "not to hurry up," instructions Azimov interpreted as a clear signal that Aliyev had not given final agreement to Putin's proposal.

[1](#)3. (C) Azimov concluded that Aliyev most likely had welcomed Russia's desire to solve its differences with the United States over missile defense but had not made any commitments to the Gabala proposal. (Note: Azimov is often vague and difficult to pin down in his conversation style. While this largely is because Azimov prefers speaking at a more theoretical level, we also believe he sometimes intentionally employs ambiguous language to provide the GOAJ maximal maneuvering room as his listeners may not be 100 percent sure what he intended. We also note that Azimov was providing third-hand information, some of it based on his personal interpretation of a third-hand conversation.)

14. (C) Azimov also confirmed that Lavrov had "briefly touched on" Gabala during his May 21-22 visit to Baku, but did not go into detail. Azimov said Gabala had also come up during his own consultations in Moscow in early May, when his Russian counterparts briefed him on their discussions with the U.S. on missile defense. Azimov's counterparts characterized the planned Polish and Czech systems as "the third deployment" and told him the U.S. had plans to deploy a missile defense system in a fourth region. The Russians told Azimov that the U.S. had identified the South Caucasus as the fourth region, and asked whether the U.S. had ever broached the subject with him. Azimov said he then briefed the Russians on discussions with the U.S. in the early and late 1990s regarding the status of Gabala. At the time, Azimov said, the U.S. had urged Azerbaijan to retain Gabala but work out a deal with Russia that would ease its security concerns. Azimov noted that Azerbaijan had done precisely that in 2002.

15. (C) Azimov said that his instructions from FM Mammadyarov on this issue were that "we should be ready to talk, consult." He added that Mammadyarov had approved his June 7 statements to the press. Azimov said Azerbaijan's public line on the Gabala issue was and would continue to be: "Azerbaijan owns Gabala and cooperates with Russia. If anything new is suggested, let's talk."

16. (C) Azimov asked that missile defense be added to the agenda of the July 9 bilateral security consultations. He would like a briefing on the current proposals for the Poland and Czech Republic systems, as well as a briefing on the technical possibilities for Gabala radar station. Azimov noted that President Aliyev must be well-prepared for these important decisions. (Comment: Embassy encourages the Department to add missile defense to the July 9 agenda. Azimov is the key decision-maker in the MFA on security issues, and has a long, detailed knowledge of the history and capacity of Gabala radar station.)

GOAJ Public Statements Also Acknowledge Coordination

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17. (C) In the days since Putin's June 8 announcement, there have been several official GOAJ statements on the proposal. The statements have addressed at least two issues. On the question of the level of coordination between Baku and Moscow before Putin's announcement, official statements have walked the line of acknowledging that both sides conducted discussions, while striving to show that coordination between Moscow and Baku was limited. Russian Embassy DCM Oleg Krokhin told Emboff on June 8 that the initiative was discussed "one to two months ago" between Azerbaijan and Russia "at high levels," and that the idea had been "thoroughly worked out" beforehand -- reftel A. (NOTE: It was originally reported that the idea had been "thoroughly worked out" by both sides, but follow up questions with Embassy translator for the June 8 meeting indicate that Krokhin's meant that the idea had been "thoroughly worked out" on the Russian side.) On the question of Azerbaijan's opinion of Putin's proposal, official statements have been upbeat, while noting that any potential negotiations between Washington and Moscow would have to be closely coordinated with Baku. President Aliyev, Foreign Minister Mammadyarov, and Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov -- in reverse order -- have been the key GOAJ officials to address these two questions. Mammadyarov and Azimov were the first officials to comment; Aliyev did not go on record until June 10, while he was in Moscow on the sidelines of an informal CIS Heads of State meeting.

Azeri Public Statements

18. (C) Azimov -- representing the initial GOAJ statement on

Putin's proposal -- on June 7 stated that "We are exchanging views on the subject both with the USA and Russia in a bilateral format . . . Azerbaijan is ready to hold bilateral and trilateral talks on the issue with the USA and Russia. . . In any case, Azerbaijan should definitely be involved in discussions on the use of the Gabala radar station." Azimov also publicly acknowledged that Lavrov and Mammadyarov discussed the Gabala proposal during Lavrov's May 21-22 visit to Baku. Azimov, however, did not amplify the nature of Mammadyarov and Lavrov's discussions.

¶9. (C) Mammadyarov's June 8 statement focused on Azerbaijan's readiness to conduct further discussions with the U.S. and Russia, while emphasizing that Azerbaijan's national interests need to be taken into account. Mammadyarov noted, "We are ready for bilateral or trilateral talks on the use of the Gabala radar station. Azerbaijan is ready to consider the issues like whether there will be a new contract, how it will be and the form of cooperation there. I do not believe that this issue will cause any difficulty with any country. Because Azerbaijan's foreign policy and position have been first of all build on its national interests." Sounding a positive note, Mammadyarov also observed that "joint use of the Gabala radar station by Russia and the US can lead to higher stability in the region and make actions in the region predictable."

¶10. (C) President Aliyev provided his first comments in a June 10 television interview while in Russia. Aliyev acknowledged that he had had a telephone conversation with Putin, while downplaying the substantive nature of their discussion. Commenting on Putin's proposal, Aliyev stated, "This issue is not new. However, it was not discussed in detail in Baku. Nor was it discussed in detail in a telephone conversation with the Russian president."

¶11. (C) Aliyev's statement on potential joint U.S. - Russian use of the Gabala radar station focused on how the new strategic benefits this type of cooperation could bring to Azerbaijan. Aliyev's upbeat commentary suggests the GOAJ perceives that if managed well, U.S. - Russian cooperation at Gabala could be a tool for enhancing Azerbaijan's regional importance and maximizing its leverage with the U.S. and Russia. Aliyev said: "I do not regard this offer as a possibility to gain (a) one-time benefit. This is a new element of strategic relations between Russia and the United States. . . Baku has never been guided with one-time benefits. I am being guided with the long-term strategic relations with Russia and the United States." Aliyev continued, "The possible joint use of the Gabala radar station could also become a new element of strategic relations and security and help to resolve certain problems more quickly."

Comment

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¶12. (C) We believe the level of Baku's prior coordination with Moscow and Baku's receptivity to U.S. - Russian access to Gabala largely coincide. On the issue of Baku's discussions about missile defense with Moscow before Putin's June 7 announcement, Baku seeks to emphasize that these discussions were limited in nature.

¶13. (C) While Azerbaijan is a strong security partner, we believe the level of discussions between Moscow and Baku before Putin's announcement may have been greater than the GOAJ is acknowledging. While there is a basic information gap on what specifically Azerbaijani and Russian officials discussed before Putin's statement, we suspect the GOAJ may not be telling us the full story. We believe this because of (a) Azimov's quick and upbeat response to Putin's announcement on the evening of June 7; (b) Azerbaijan's broader interest in not telling the U.S. about the full extent of personal and interstate relations between

Azerbaijan and Russia; and (c) Putin and Aliyev's close personal ties (reftel B).

¶14. (C) While we are unlikely to ever fully know what Azerbaijan and Russia may have discussed before Putin's June 8 statements, we believe sustained engagement with the GOAJ is critical. Briefing DFM Azimov on U.S. missile defense options during the scheduled July 9-10 bilateral security dialogue is a critical next step.

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